

REIMAGINE OREGON: IMPROVING YOUTH-TO-WORK AND WORKFORCE SYSTEMS IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

APPENDIX B

REGIONAL CONVENING SUMMARIES

This appendix contains summaries of each of the four regional conversations with industry members, workforce stakeholders, educators, state agency representatives, and community members. Regional conversations were hosted in August 2020 in coordination with Lane Workforce Partnership, East Cascades Works, Southwestern Oregon Workforce Investment Board, and Clackamas Workforce Partnership.

SUMMARY OF THE EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

Prepared by:

Kristin Wolff, thinkers+doers

September 2020

Prepared for Oregon ASK, Lane Workforce Partnership, East Cascades Works, Southwestern Oregon Workforce Investment Board, and Clackamas Workforce Partnership, with support from the National League of Cities.

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

With the support of NLC, Oregon ASK partnered with four workforce boards and representatives from nearly a dozen cities and mayors' offices to capture the experiences of their communities and document early needs, lessons, solutions, and crisis-driven innovations that might inform recovery going forward. The project convened four online conversations involving 135 people, all informed by a pre-event poll completed by 50 people from across the four regions. (This allowed us to prioritize different topics in different regions.) A subsequent convening of 88 stakeholders from across the state was convened on September 22 to share findings and preliminary recommendations, and build support for solving critical challenges.

This document summarizes the content of the East Cascades convening, the second of four similar conversations. This convening took place on August 10, 2020, using the Zoom video conference platform. It was hosted by the East Cascade Works, the workforce board serving a ten-county region in central Oregon and located in Bend. Twenty-five people participated, representing a wide range of stakeholders including elected officials, industry representatives from key sectors, education and training providers from throughout the county and region, and leaders from the Klamath Tribal administration. The convening included small group and large group conversations supported by note-taking and recording.

Key Issues are those that generated the most discussion during the convening and structure the summary that follows.

Key Issues:

- Connected work and learning
- Digital inclusion
- Childcare
- Engaging business

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

CONNECTED WORK AND LEARNING

Participants expressed a high degree of consensus on key challenges, in particular, creating better and more universal work experiences for students and more integrated approaches to work and learning for working adults.

SOLUTIONS

Based on their experience and expertise, participants advocated for:

- **A greater range of work experience opportunities for high school students,** including paid work, internships, pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, volunteer work, and project-based learning with local employers, government agencies or nonprofits. Ideally, these activities would be paid and connected to students' learning experience and rewarded with credentials or credit. Participants also expressed support for making such activities universally available or even required. De La Salle High School in North Portland was cited as a model. The following resources and examples were also cited:
 - A universal job shadow program (in Hood River)
 - Business, industry, and workforce awareness activities in the middle school years (guest speakers, site visits, school industry projects, etc.)
 - Entrepreneurship and leadership opportunities such as those provided through the [REAP Program](#) in North Portland.
 - [Youth Career Connect](#), a platform linking high school youth to internships with local industry in central Oregon.
- **Repeated exposure to work-centered learning for students.** Although many programs exist, participants noted that most focus on a single high school experience rather than a connected and predictable series of age-appropriate activities over time.
- **A systemic approach to connecting school and work-centered learning activities.** Participants reported that some students and families confront a sea of choices but little information they can use to make decisions because there is no shared approach to collecting or reporting program outcomes publically. Other families have very few choices (and little data). Much of this

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

discrepancy is the result of family awareness of opportunities and ability to pay.

“Our state needs better systems and structures that support youth early in getting workforce experience and career exploration.”

- *Local Government Leader*

For adults, including, post-secondary students, who are more often seeking to advance at work or change careers, participants expressed enthusiasm for:

- **Higher quality, more connected, and better-supported opportunities to learn while employed.** Participants emphasized the importance of hands-on-training that is accessible to busy adults with families and jobs, affordable, and credit-bearing—so that students can earn certificates and degrees that help them advance their careers over time.

“Most of the time but especially during a crisis, navigators are essential for keeping people whole.”

- *Educator, Program Manager*

- **Comprehensive learning and career navigation support.** Long a feature of effective workforce programming, navigation services support people in making decisions about advancing their programs of study. These typically include helping students understand the enrollment process, select programs and courses, identify grants, loans, and other sources of financial aid, and supporting students in succeeding in their coursework. Some navigators also provide career-focused services like skills assessment or labor market information and analysis. Participants emphasized that these services are even more critical for low-income students, parents, first-generation students, Black, Indigenous and other students of color, and students facing other barriers, and are typically difficult to fund. In light of the COVID crisis, participants called for “super navigators” who could help students and (families) access the full range of support they might need to transition to jobs, including assistance with housing, childcare, food stamps, transportation, or other critical needs in addition to skills training.

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

- o As one example, Central Oregon Community College (COCC) is expanding its partnership with [Thrive](#), an advocate, support, and navigation partner for older students.
- **Access to mentors and peer and professional networks**, especially for those entering new fields or changing careers. Educators and workforce professionals noted that this kind of support is built into many work-based learning models such as apprenticeship but less common in traditional education and training programs.
- **Enhanced technology support and internet connectivity**, including modern devices, high-speed internet, and assistance in securing and maintaining connections. Participants emphasized that the campus computer lab is insufficient, especially for working adults, and entirely inaccessible during the pandemic.

CONCERNS GOING FORWARD

Looking beyond the immediate crisis to recovery, participants raised three concerns:

- **Managing trauma.** Educators and others raised the importance of helping students return to school, employees return to work, and people return to community, safely and with confidence. There was widespread agreement that in the wake of COVID-19, social unrest, and wildfires, Oregonians will not return to what was but forge a new kind of normal. Toward that end, trauma-informed workforce programming and human resources departments as well as accessible mental health services will be more central to workforce training than at any time in recent years. Participants used chat to suggest learning how to integrate these tools from veteran-serving and foster-care support programs.
- **Investing in basic infrastructure.** Several participants noted that many public schools and institutions, roads and bridges, and basic services—including water on the Warm Springs reservation—were in need of repair or investment long prior to the crisis, especially in shrinking rural communities. These gaps will be more keenly felt going forward as budgets tighten and resources

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

become scarce. Participants expressed a need to ‘shore up the foundation’ after the intensity of the COVID crises has passed.

- **Building partnerships focused on long-term economic well-being.** Participants generally shared the view that recovery would not be immediate or robust in the short term. Several were concerned about CARES Act resources expiring before employment or school returned, dampening an already fragile economy. In addition, key sectors on which the region depends, such as outdoor recreation and tourism, have been severely curtailed. These and other challenges will require uncommon partnerships focused on problem-solving and high levels of collaboration and alignment to address.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Participants acknowledge serious challenges. At the same time, they affirmed the need for innovation and saw a higher level of willingness to reinvent old structures and processes within their organizations and among their peers than just months ago.

Innovation opportunities cited include:

- **Designing remote-first opportunities to work and learn.** Working from home is already more common in Oregon than in other states (in urban and rural areas). However, many more firms (in and outside the state) have come to realize that more work *could* be done from home. Moreover, the risks associated with remote work prior to the pandemic—Who will supervise? What about liability? Etc.—will now be weighed against the risks of spreading the virus and maintaining expensive commercial leases during a recession. This changes what is possible in designing business support, skills training and work-based learning, and startup opportunities for remote delivery. It also provides a unique opportunity to center equity as we design new programs and modernize existing ones. Two specific opportunities for remote-first programming were identified during the session.
 - **Oregon State University Cascades’ [Co-Lab’s Remote Micro Internships](#).** Launched as a pilot prior to the crisis, Co-Lab’s internship program is now working even more effectively as a virtual model. More

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

employment opportunities are virtual as a result of the pandemic, which has reduced the risk employers perceive in engaging students. The program has found its real value proposition lies less in matching students and employers than in structuring projects, helping students succeed in their roles, and documenting and facilitating shared learnings with peers.

- o **Remote-first internships.** One participant cited a new internship program that had been successful in [Redmond](#) and was planned for replication in Bend this spring. COVID disrupted implementation. Now there is an opportunity to retain the Redmond model's successful brand, while designing a remote-first program going forward that benefits both locations.

- **Working with employers and partners to document and embed new safety practices** in the workplace and in in-person learning environments. Several participants cited the success of local manufacturing companies in adapting to new safety mandates. Government agencies employing essential workers in collaborative environments also reported having learned a great deal about safe workplace practices in recent months. One participant suggested academic and workforce training programs might integrate some of these practices into their own business operations in an effort to better prepare students and accelerate the post-COVID recovery at the same time.

“The biggest thing that’s changed for me is that I wake up every day thinking about the safety of my employees. We’ve learned a lot and appreciate that so many regional partners have reached out to us to share and learn.”

- *Tribal Government Leader*

- **Leveraging participation in local and regional partnerships and state and national response efforts for local benefit.**
 - o As an example, four colleges in Oregon (including Columbia Gorge Community College) are participating in the **National Governors Association’s [Reskilling and Recovery Network](#)**, a partnership of colleges in over 20 states. These colleges could share lessons from their experience and the experiences of other states in a structured way so

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

that key lessons are spread among other Oregon colleges, workforce boards, and community partners.

- o In another example, Oregon recently launched [OnwardOR](#) to facilitate the state's crisis response. At least a dozen other states have also launched the platform, many connecting it robustly to the provision of public services and response efforts in communities and regions. This and other agency-neutral, user-centered platforms like it can help align, connect, and integrate the efforts of many public programs and agencies, partners, and sectors.
- o In a more policy-centered example, workforce stakeholders emphasized the lack of alignment between the mandate of workforce boards (and workforce programs), and the resources allocated to support this work, and the metrics by which performance is measured. They called for shared advocacy around the need for flexibility in the short term and more fundamental change over time.

“We’re used to education and workforce being highly regulated. In this moment, we need innovation and experimentation. We can impose structure in the *documentation* so we learn what works.”

- Economic Development Leader

Regardless of the specific application—learning design, efforts to tackle digital inclusion, or sector-focused skills training—participants expressed the need to **find ways to experiment**. They recognized that existing systems had many problems prior to COVID19 and are eager for increased flexibility as they try to meet needs that support Oregon's recovery.

DIGITAL INCLUSION

The subject of technology access generated energetic conversation about critical and difficult challenges this poses for youth and adults training for new jobs or careers (see Connected Work and Learning).

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

Broader challenges were also raised.

- **The lack of hardware (devices) proved a more significant problem than stakeholders had expected in spring 2020.** Participants speculated that this stemmed from families with multiple school-aged children sharing a single desktop or laptop. This approach may have worked prior to COVID-19, but once schools closed and instruction was delivered remotely, additional devices were needed.
- **High speed connectivity is not ubiquitous,** leaving some Oregon students and families for whom the internet became a lifeline during the pandemic, searching for public access points. Respondents said the challenge proved more difficult for Tribal members who tend to live far from such infrastructure, for English language learners who may have had trouble locating access points, and for low-income individuals who had less access to transportation. The potential health consequences of going outside the home for immunocompromised and other high-risk individuals posed another challenge. Finally, some families maintained home internet but struggled to afford the additional bandwidth required for multiple, simultaneous users.
- **Some families struggled to use the technology effectively**—setting up devices, accessing platforms, tracking passwords, managing assistive devices, cameras, and microphones all proved complex, especially for families with multiple school-aged children.

The COVID crisis has made evident what many educators and technology watchers already knew about technology—the absence of high-speed internet connectivity and technology infrastructure is holding Oregon students and families back. Philanthropy and volunteerism filled some of the gap in the short term but questions remain about our ability to sustain access to modern devices (when the new ones break) and high-speed wifi (when the low-cost COVID plans end), and provide technical assistance to parents and students ongoing.

“Ensuring WiFi connectivity access across rural spaces is a huge and urgent need.”

- *Business Leader*

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

SOLUTIONS

Participants acknowledged the need to address digital inclusion both as a challenge and also within the context of specific programs. Many had acted in the short-term, indicating that it may be too early for comprehensive strategies. They contributed the following short-term solutions:

- **Build or designate more community access points** and provide technical support for people and families (and remote support for homes).
 - As an example, the Klamath Tribal administration is using CARES Act resources to establish a remote learning center at its administrative headquarters.
 - Many shuttered colleges and retailers allowed Oregonians to access wifi from sidewalks or parking lots—a solution in a crisis, but not an effective strategy ongoing, as many participants noted.
 - Crook County Schools distributed laptops and outfitted school buses with wifi hotspots. (This had the benefit of keeping drivers employed, but forced structure onto families' schedules that was not always welcome.)
 - Community-level partnerships, business, and philanthropy helped, too (e.g., Comcast Essentials). State-level efforts like [LINK Oregon](#) provided information and advocacy and are working on statewide solutions.
- **Build support for devices and connectivity into budgets**, especially for remote-first programs.
- **Partner with local industry to:**
 - Expand access to devices by encouraging recycling and employee discount purchasing programs

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

- Expand connectivity statewide (to boost competitiveness for firms as well as access for families)
- To design remote-first services (for government) and work (for firms) as we recover from the crisis.

The need to close the digital inclusion gap is urgent. Oregonians are currently unable to receive basic government services without devices and high-speed connectivity. The COVID crisis has revealed the critical importance of these connections.

A final point raised by participants is the need to design all government services for remote-first access.

“It’s time to change how government delivers services. Flexibility and online delivery will be critical in meeting people’s needs now.”

- Anonymous Poll Response

CHILDCARE

Childcare was also identified as a serious and urgent concern—and not just for parents. Participants pointed to accessibility as pre-existing challenges amplified and exacerbated by the COVID crisis. Specific concerns named included navigating options and securing “slots” at accessible locations.

SOLUTIONS

There was widespread agreement that childcare stakeholders could not solve the childcare crisis alone. They pointed to:

- **Business-led solutions, including subsidized or onsite care**, especially since smaller “pods” would likely be preferred over large care centers for some time into the future.
- **Participation of faith-based organizations** that can help reduce cost and increased access by subsidizing space for care in distributed locations. The provision of culturally-conscious care and support for English language

SUMMARY OF EAST CASCADES REGIONAL CONVENING

learners may also be scalable in this context.

- **Cross-sector partnerships and enhanced communication between Child Care Resources and Referral services and community stakeholders**, because the context is changing so quickly and the level of concern among stakeholders is so high.
- **Neutral partners who can broker the expansion of services and access** was noted as important and helpful. (The Ford Family Foundation is currently engaged in this work.)
- **Formalizing and scaling the “family pod” or microcenter approach to care (within the bounds of the law)**. Although this model raises concerns about income and access, new companies with a commitment to [equity](#) are entering the space.
- **Learning from informal approaches, social innovation, and mutual aid efforts** (“Pandemic partners”) that have been providing crisis-response childcare since March. Participants noted that this was an unregulated space but emphasized that in this moment, all solutions should be considered.
- **Centering the work of the new Central Oregon [Childcare Accelerator](#)**, which has already helped existing centers adapt to the crisis.

“We understand that we are building the plane while flying it here, but at this time, no solution should be out of bounds.”

- Chamber of Commerce

Participants expressed excitement about the new Childcare Accelerator, launched in 2019, that aims to generate 1,000 new childcare spots by 2022. The program is working on a series of pilots with the Chamber of Commerce, the Central Oregon Community College, Oregon State University Cascades, schools and parent organizations. Models include in-home care and center-based care for ages 0-5, connected in a network to increase the resilience of the network. The initiative was cited by participants in all four regional conversations across the state.

ENGAGING BUSINESS

Many of the solutions discussed require engaging businesses as partners in community problem solving, not just sources of information about skill needs or demand for labor. For example, work-based learning, including pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship, all require employers to partner as learning and training providers playing an active role in the talent development process. Scaling affordable childcare, addressing the digital divide, tackling equity and inclusion, and preparing for the future of work all require the participation of employers with an interest in achieving these community goals.

Participants discussed the myriad ways their own organizations engaged employers and how alternative structures might deliver more value to more stakeholders with less cost, more focus, and less duplication of effort.